Fairbury's Temperance Movement

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In the 1880s, Fairbury was a wild town. Several coal mines were operating in Fairbury at that time. These thirsty coal miners could patronize any of seven saloons in the village. There were two saloons per block along Main Street, plus one on the east end.

The saloons opened at six in the morning when the early birds went to work. They were busy all day long. They were the last of the businesses to close at night. After ten o'clock, the saloons closed, and the helplessly inebriated were thrown out into the alley, to be sorted over by their friends and taken home in wheelbarrows.

If a customer lacked the money for a drink, it usually could be charged. There were no minimum drinking age requirements. The saloons were swarming with boys. Gangs of drunken juveniles invested the whole village. Some of these boys were under ten years of age. They rampaged the streets until late at night and terrorized the inhabitants with their fighting and vandalism.

The pitiful horses of the drunkards were very noticeable. These horses were un-blanketed against the weather. They were left standing for hours in bad weather at their hitching posts in front of the saloons.

The chief reason for the general atmosphere of lawlessness was the attitude of society in the 1880s about drunkards. People reasoned that when a man was drunk, he did not have his normal faculties, and, therefore, did not realize what he was doing. Consequently, he was not to be held accountable for any of his actions during that time. He could kill a man, yet go scot-free, whereas a sober man would be hung.

Excessive drinking and alcoholism were chronic problems of that era. Preachers and medical doctors saw the negative impacts on Fairbury families every day. There were no minimum drinking age laws. There were no support groups for alcoholics like Alcoholics Anonymous.

Women felt particularly frustrated at the excessive drinking problem. If a husband drank excessively, the social norms of that era said a woman could not work outside the home to provide for her family. Women also did not have the right to vote. They could not vote to ban alcohol or vote for politicians who were Prohibitionists.

Women across the United States were frustrated at the excessive drinking problem. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WTCU) was organized in late 1873 in Ohio. They were among the first organizations of women devoted to social reform. Their program linked the religious and the secular through concerted and far-reaching reform

strategies based on applied Christianity. This organization was a strong supporter of the temperance movement. They also supported the right of women to vote in elections.

In the July 30, 1886 edition of the Blade, the Editor scolded both the citizens and politicians of Fairbury. The Editor pointed out the Village Board took in a great deal of tax money from the saloons each year. None of this money was being used to combat the most significant problems Fairbury was facing at that time. These problems included churches standing vacant, streets growing up in weeds, boys and hoodlums exercising their own home rule, no fire protection system, and no safe public water supply. The Editor thought this situation ought to make all citizens blush with shame.

One of the most active years for the temperance movement in Fairbury was in 1894. The Livingston County branch of the national WCTU held a three-day meeting at the Baptist Church in Fairbury. The wife of Dr. George C. Lewis, Ella Beach Lewis, was the county chairwoman of this group. She was the mother of Alma Lewis James, Fairbury historian. They had a massive attendance at the meetings. They recruited Dr. Carrie Shaw, a Chicago women's activist, and evangelist, to be one of the featured speakers at the conference.

On one side of the temperance battles were the saloon owners who profited from patrons buying alcohol in their establishments. The Village Board had to be respondent to the Fairbury men who voted them into office. The annual fees from the saloons helped to pay for most of the government activities of Fairbury. On the other side of the battle were the women who encountered the ill effects of excessive drinking. Ministers and medical doctors were also in favor of prohibiting alcohol because they saw the negative impacts on Fairbury families. Because women could not yet vote, they would often stage massive anti-alcohol marches on Main Street at election times. They would make their husbands attend the demonstrations as well to try to threaten the saloon owners since their husbands could vote.

Eventually, the Fairbury Village Board bowed to public pressure and instituted stricter regulation of the saloons. New village ordinances required each saloon keeper to post a three-thousand dollar bond. Each liquor license had a cost of $600, and it could be revoked. The hours of business for the saloons were shortened. They could not open before 5 AM and had to close by 10 PM. The saloons had to be kept reasonably clean, and the windows washed. Clean windows allowed people outside of the bar to have a clear view of the inside of the establishment. No pool tables or any games of any nature were allowed. No rowdiness was permitted.

Saloon keepers could no longer sell liquor to minors. Boys were no longer allowed in the place, nor were they permitted to carry buckets of beer to their fathers or any other relatives.

Worst of all, according to the saloon owners, they were made to close on Sundays. Using the front door only, the owner or assistant might enter the building to tend to the fires or light the night lamp, but they could not stay a minute longer.

In 1919, two new amendments to the U.S. Constitution were ratified. The Eighteenth Amendment declared the production, transport, and sale of intoxicating liquors to be illegal. The 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution granted American women the right to vote. Fourteen years later, in 1933, the Twenty-First Amendment repealed the Eighteenth Amendment, ending the nationwide prohibition of alcohol.

The Prohibitionist party was potent in Fairbury. Every local election was a fresh battle between the "wets" and the "drys." Since they were denied the power to vote, women were handicapped in their efforts but no means idle.

Just before the local option elections, they would join their husbands in mass meetings as a giant demonstration of public opinion calculated to worry the saloon people.